



Work With Us
Free Newsletter
Stay Connected

How to Make Your Library Great

By [Project for Public Spaces](#) on Jan 2, 2009 | [Leave a Comment](#)

[Share on tumblr](#)

To succeed today, libraries must master many different roles—some traditionally associated with libraries, some not. Their new, multi-faceted missions must be supported with great design, strong amenities, and popular programs. That's a lot to juggle, but when everything works together, libraries become places that anchor community life and bring people together. To help libraries fulfill their potential as neighborhood institutions, PPS offers the following strategies as a roadmap to success.

Want to turn your library into a great community destination?

Contact [Project for Public Spaces](#) or the [Americans for Libraries Council](#) to learn how we can help.

1. Great Libraries Offer a Broad Mix of Community Services

Because libraries tend to be centrally located within neighborhoods, they are ideal places to offer numerous community services—from child care to job placement to income tax advice to university extension courses. These types of community offerings are a crucial part of the mix for libraries seeking to become multi-use destinations.

The Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick, Maine, for example, works with the Mid Coast Hospital and Parkview Adventist Medical Center to offer “Health Kits” to childcare providers. This equips caregivers to initiate conversations with children (left) about sensitive topics like living with disabilities, going to the doctor, and conflict resolution.

2. Great Libraries Foster Communication

Innovative libraries aren't content serving as one-way conduits of information; they want to foster dialogue and exchange with their users. To that end, many libraries house community access television and radio stations, and other means of disseminating information freely. The Rotterdam public library, for instance, has a broad range of programs to share Dutch language and culture, including an in-house movie theater (below). In one annual program, the theater hosts festivals featuring the work of local and student filmmakers.



Translation services, literacy programs, foreign language classes, English as a second language (ESL) tutors, and computer training are yet more ways that libraries strengthen language and communication skills among patrons. Many of these services are of immense value to recent immigrants, providing a means to help people navigate the process of citizenship, secure housing and medical providers, find child care, and become established in their communities.

3. Great Libraries Showcase History and Information

Libraries are widely appreciated as stewards of local history and lore, repositories of a community's collective memory. In addition to housing genealogical centers, settlement records, archives and map collections, library innovators are captivating patrons through storytelling, traditional festivities, and exhibits celebrating culture and myth.

Libraries can also connect people to their communities by serving as civic information centers. They are ideal forums for public discourse about timely local topics such as zoning changes, new developments, and government initiatives. Furthermore, with information on community events, entertainment, and noteworthy destinations, libraries can welcome visitors and help understand and better appreciate the community.



Birmingham, Alabama is particularly fortunate to have a library that preserves records of the city's central role in the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s. The library itself played a role in the movement, as the site of an important sit-in by African-American college students. Today, the library is home to an incredible collection of documents and photographs (above) that tell the story of civil rights activism for following generations.

4. Great Libraries Build Capacity for Local Businesses

More and more libraries fill important needs for employers, jobseekers, and consumers. They play a crucial “think tank” role for local start-up businesses and community development advocates, helping them acquire entrepreneurial skills and discover methods of raising capital. For people seeking work or taking on career changes, libraries connect them to employers and specialized job training. For the consumer, libraries may provide up-to-date information about the best businesses to patronize in their area.



At the Johnson County Public Library in Kansas City, Kansas (left), workshops complement a business book series and access to online databases. The library’s thorough range of services—from recommending useful books to hands-on coursework—provides resources for all kinds of small-scale entrepreneurs.

5. Great Libraries Become Public Gathering Places

The spaces inside and outside libraries are perfect for public proclamations, celebrations, fairs, and festivals – as well as smaller but no less important events that occur on a regular basis, like brown bag lectures or midday concerts. These activities reinforce the library’s role as a community anchor, and leading libraries are jumping at the chance to attract people by expanding their programs. To succeed as lively gathering places, a library can offer an eclectic mix that may include outdoor exhibits on science or history, temporary public art installations, games and chess tables, or outdoor play areas linked to the children’s reading room.



The Public Library (left) in Mississauga, Ontario plays a central role in revitalizing public space in this city near Toronto. By participating in activities like this “ribfest”, Mississauga’s library has become a center of public community life.

6. Great Libraries Boost Local Retail and Public Markets

The public goals of libraries mesh very well with the community-minded aims of public markets. As more cities and towns turn to markets to spur the local economy and encourage new business development, it is becoming common to see library lobbies, parking lots, and sidewalks used for farmers markets, book markets, or art markets.

Libraries may be for lending, but there's nothing wrong with getting in on the retail action too. Some sell used books in a gift shop or open a café to serve patrons and residents. Others provide their communities with international newsstands and video rental facilities. Making use of their prime locations, libraries can rent space to arts organizations and commercial galleries, or for public events—even weddings!



Special markets in Riverside, California (left) are held in front of the library, creating a critical mass of pedestrians in this Southern California city—which boosts the library and local vendors alike.

7. Great Libraries Offer Easy Access

Because everyone uses them, libraries need to be accessible. It is essential to provide people with a variety of ways to get there, including convenient transit routes, walkable streets, and adequate bicycle facilities. First and foremost, libraries should be connected to the sidewalk network, not set apart and surrounded by a sea of parking. Nearby streets should be designed so that cars slow down around the library, crosswalks should be well marked, and lights should be timed for pedestrians, not vehicles.



Oregon's Multnomah County Library is conveniently accessible to Portland's residents. Served by Portland's light rail network and located in the heart of a pedestrian-friendly downtown, the library is truly open to everyone.

8. Great Libraries Make the Surrounding Area Come Alive

Knowing how to enhance a library with active streets and sidewalks is key to attracting more visitors and patrons. A library with an entrance opening right onto sitting stairs where people can read outside or sit in the sun, for instance, will be infinitely more lively compared to one with blank walls around the ground floor. Going further, the reading room could flow outside onto a public square. Or a bookstore and café on the ground floor could spill onto the street. The best libraries foster exactly this type of connection between the inner library—the stacks, computers, and reading areas—and the “outer library”—the façade, sidewalk, plazas, parking areas, and the rest of the town. Creating an active, welcoming outer library is essential to the well-being of the library as a whole.



Toronto's Beaches Branch library (left) is located on Kew Gardens, a beautiful park fronting the scenic lakefront. With strong connections to the park, waterfront, and the rest of the community, the Beaches Branch Public library is a hub of activity and a popular meeting spot.

9. Great Libraries Feature Multiple Attractions and Destinations

A surefire strategy for libraries is providing a series of smaller “places” within and around them to attract people. These attractions don't need to be elaborate to make the library a success. In fact, numerous small attractions, such as a vendor cart or playground, will effectively draw people throughout the day. Strategically locating these attractions in proximity to each other generates synergy and stimulates further public activity.



The Brookline branch library of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Libraries is an elegant facility with many distinct "places" within it. Comfortable reading nooks, children's play areas (left) and rooms for movie screenings help create a diversity of attractions within the cozy facility.

10. Great Libraries Are Designed to Support Function

Library buildings and their outdoor public spaces (streets, sidewalks and parking lots) should be designed so that the spaces can be used in different ways for different patrons throughout the course of the day, week, and the year. To allow for overlapping and changing uses, form needs to support function.



The Pictou Antigonish regional library in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia supports outdoor use with these movable tables and chairs and seasonal plantings (left). During a recent workshop and training course with library staff and other local stakeholders, PPS recommended expanding this area with additional tables and chairs, a coffee cart and cafe umbrellas, together with a used book sales area. Coupled with façade improvements that would increase transparency and strengthen connections between indoor and outdoor spaces, these improvements would create the kind of synergy that attracts people to this place all day long.

11. Great Libraries Provide a Variety of Amenities

The importance of good amenities cannot be overstated for any library that wants to become a multi-purpose destination. The right amenities greatly bolster efforts to attract more patrons and serve a variety of different people. If a library decides to offer Wi-Fi service, for instance, they will optimize public use if they also give web surfers comfortable places to sit both inside the building and outside under shady trees. Other amenities may include public art, fountains or other central features that help establish a convivial setting for social interaction, encouraging people to gather and linger.



Downtown Denver's Public Library is not only a community resource, but a high-profile art center. With sculptures, murals, and other amenities, the library has helped to make downtown Denver a destination for arts fans and tourists.

12. Great Libraries Change with the Calendar

Libraries are at their best when their programs evolve throughout the year. Holidays, seasonal changes, and dates of local historic significance all afford great opportunities for libraries to celebrate the cultural and civic life of a community. To remain vital and interesting all year, libraries should make rotating horticultural displays, seasonal markets, holiday celebrations, and civic events central to their programming menu.



Camden, Maine's public library, which excels in the breadth of ways it contributes to the town, features many seasonal activities in its amphitheater, children's reading room, and coffee house. For example, a traditional Morris dance (left) draws the community to the library's green during the summer.

13. Great Libraries Depend on Wise Management

Managing a library for public use goes beyond security and maintenance. It involves constant evaluation of how effectively the programs, amenities, and design features serve patrons and the mission of the library itself. A good management effort keeps the library operating in peak form by responding to evolving needs of users with ongoing improvements and refinements.



The central branch of the New York Public Library boasts a shining example of how effective management plays a critical role in maximizing public use year-round. In partnership with its “backyard” neighbor, Bryant Park, the library operates an outdoor reading room stocked with books, magazines and newspapers. This popular amenity remains well-managed throughout the winter too, when it sets up shop in a tent that perfectly complements the park’s ice rink, seasonal café and holiday market.

14. Great Libraries Catalyze Community Revitalization

When you put all the ingredients of a great library together, you end up with a public institution whose influence extends far beyond its physical location. The best libraries anchor communities. Because they are highly visible centers of civic life, these libraries instill public confidence in their neighborhoods and catalyze further investment from both the public and private sectors. The power of these institutions to revitalize communities was central to recovery efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when libraries along the Gulf Coast were among the first institutions to receive government support and private philanthropic attention.



Funded through a public-private collaboration, the relocation of Kansas City, Missouri’s Central Library to a historic bank building, spurred the development of a Library District, a reclaimed part of downtown that now boasts housing, retail, art galleries, and a refurbished streetscape. As part of the effort, the facade of a nearby parking structure was painted to resemble the spines of books that local residents selected to represent Kansas City (left).

[Share on tumblr](#)

Tagged with → [Libraries and Civic Centers - April 2007](#)

Author: [Project for Public Spaces](#)